

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE  
CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**

**RIPARIAN FOREST BUFFER**

(Ac.)  
CODE 391

**DEFINITION**

An area predominantly trees and/or shrubs located adjacent to and up-gradient from watercourses or water bodies.

**PURPOSE**

- Create shade to lower or maintain water temperatures to improve habitat for aquatic organisms.
- Create or improve riparian habitat and provide a source of detritus and large woody debris.
- Reduce excess amounts of sediment, organic material, nutrients and pesticides in surface runoff and reduce excess nutrients and other chemicals in shallow ground water flow.
- Reduce pesticide drift entering the water body.
- Restore riparian plant communities.
- Increase carbon storage in plant biomass and soils.

**CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES**

Riparian forest buffers are applied on areas adjacent to permanent or intermittent streams, lakes, ponds, and wetlands. They are not applied to stabilize stream banks or shorelines.

**CRITERIA**

**General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes**

The riparian forest buffer shall be positioned appropriately and designed to achieve sufficient width, length, vertical structure/density and connectivity to accomplish the intended purpose(s).

Dominant vegetation will consist of existing, naturally regenerated, or seeded/planted trees and shrubs suited to the soil and hydrology of the site and the intended purpose(s).

The vegetation will extend a minimum width to achieve the purpose(s). Measurement shall begin at and perpendicular to the normal water line, bank-full elevation, or the top of the bank as determined locally.

Overland flow through the riparian area will be maintained as sheet flow.

Russian-olive is a state-designated noxious weed. It shall not be used for riparian buffer plantings.

For sites to be regenerated or planted, excessive sheet-rill and concentrated-flow erosion will be controlled.

Excessive sheet-rill and concentrated-flow erosion will be controlled in the areas immediately adjacent and up-gradient of the buffer site.

Use tree and shrub species that are native and non-invasive. Substitution with improved and locally accepted cultivars or purpose-specific species is allowed. For plantings and seeding, only viable, high-quality and adapted plant materials will be used.

Favor tree and shrub species that have multiple values such as those suited for timber, biomass, nuts, fruit, browse, nesting, aesthetics and tolerance to locally used herbicides.

Periodic removal of some forest products such as high value trees, medicinal herbs, nuts, and fruits is permitted provided the intended purpose is not compromised by the loss of vegetation or harvesting disturbance.

Necessary site preparation and planting shall be done at a time and manner to insure survival and growth of selected species for achieving the intended purpose(s).

Livestock shall be controlled or excluded as necessary to achieve the intended purpose

Harmful plant and animal pests present on the site will be controlled or eliminated as

necessary to achieve and maintain the intended purpose.

Comply with applicable federal, state and local laws and regulations during the installation, operation (including harvesting activities) and maintenance of this practice.

**Additional Criteria to Reduce Excess Amounts of Sediment, Organic Material, Nutrients and Pesticides in Surface Runoff and Reduce Excess Nutrients and Other Chemicals in Shallow Ground Water Flow**

The minimum width shall be at least 35 feet measured horizontally on a line perpendicular to the water body beginning at the normal water line, bank-full elevation, or the top of the bank as determined locally.

The width will be extended in high nutrient, sediment, and animal waste application areas, where the contributing area is not adequately treated or where an additional level of protection is needed.

Existing, functional underground drains through the riparian area will pass pollutants directly to the outlet. To filter such pollutants, drains can be plugged, removed or replaced with perforated pipe/end plugs to allow passage and filtration of drain water through the riparian forest root zone. Caution is advised that saturated conditions in the riparian and adjacent areas may limit existing land use and management.

**Additional Criteria to Create or improve riparian habitat and provide a source of detritus and large woody debris.**

The width will be extended to meet the minimum habitat requirements of the wildlife or aquatic species of concern.

Existing functional underground drains shall be replaced with non-perforated pipe under the buffer area to alleviate root intrusion and to sustain the drains functionality. Alternatively, a regulating valve or structure may be installed on the drain to control drain outflow.

Establish plant communities that address the target aquatic and terrestrial wildlife needs and have multiple values such as habitat, nutrient uptake and shading.

**Additional Criteria for Increasing Carbon Storage in Biomass and Soils**

Maximize width and length of the riparian forest buffer.

Select plants that have higher rates of carbon sequestration in soils and plant biomass and are adapted to the site to assure strong health and vigor. Plant the appropriate stocking rate for the site.

**CONSIDERATIONS**

The severity of bank erosion, concentrated flow erosion or mass soil movement and its influence on existing or potential riparian trees and shrubs should be assessed. Watershed-level or contributing area treatment or bank stability activities may be needed before establishing a riparian forest buffer.

When concentrated flow erosion and sedimentation cannot be controlled vegetatively, consider structural or mechanical treatments.

Favor tree and shrub species that are native, non-invasive, or have multiple values such as those suited for timber, biomass, nuts, fruit, browse, nesting, aesthetics and tolerance to locally used herbicides.

Tree and shrub species, which may be alternate hosts to undesirable pests, should be avoided. Species diversity should be considered to avoid loss of function due to species-specific pests.

Allelopathic impacts of plants should be considered.

The location, layout and density of the buffer should complement natural features, and mimic natural riparian forests.

Harvesting of timber should only occur when the ground is frozen.

Consider leaving or placing downed woody material for habitat and reduction of runoff velocity.

For sites where continued function of drains is desired, woody root penetration may eventually plug the underground structure. In these cases, a setback of woody vegetation planted over the drain maintained in herbaceous cover or using rigid, non-perforated pipe will minimize woody root penetration.

Maximize widths, lengths, and connectivity of riparian forest buffers.

The species and plant communities that attain biomass more quickly will sequester carbon faster. The rate of carbon sequestration is enhanced as riparian plants mature and soil organic matter increases.

### **PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS**

Specifications for applying this practice shall be prepared for each site and recorded using

approved specification sheets, job sheets, technical notes, and narrative statements in the conservation plan, or other acceptable documentation.

### **OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE**

The riparian forest buffer will be inspected periodically and protected from adverse impacts such as excessive vehicular and pedestrian traffic, pest infestations, concentrated flows, pesticides, livestock or wildlife damage and fire.

Replacement of dead trees or shrubs and control of undesirable vegetative competition will be continued until the buffer is, or will progress to, a fully functional condition.

Any manipulation of species composition, stand structure and stocking by cutting or killing selected trees and understory vegetation shall sustain the intended purpose(s).

Control or exclusion of livestock and harmful wildlife shall continue.

Fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals used to maintain buffer function shall not impact water quality.